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SIPDIS

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STATE PASS TO USAID
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SUBJECT: DEVELOPMENT, CITES TOP CONCERNS FOR OMAN'S
ENVIRONMENTAL STAKEHOLDERS

11. (U) Summary: Oman's rapid development plans and its ability to effectively implement the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) topped the list of concerns for environmental stakeholders during Amman ESTH Officer's January 26-29 visit to Muscat. Omani officials welcomed USG technical assistance programs to build environmental capacity in the Sultanate, including CITES implementation and nature conservation efforts. The government recently strengthened its environment ministry with a newly appointed minister, and plans are underway to construct a new botanical garden to showcase Oman's flora. End Summary.

CITES Implementation

12. (SBU) On January 29, Amman ESTH Regional Officer and Econoff met with Ali al-Kiyumi, Director General for Nature Conservation, Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs (MECA), to discuss the status of Oman's recent accession to CITES. Kiyumi noted that accession paperwork remained under review with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but added that Oman has already been complying with most CITES provisions. Kiyumi further stated that once the accession document is deposited with CITES, the government would implement modifying legislation to comply with the Convention's enforcement provisions. In preparation for CITES, Kiyumi said that customs officials at Oman's six border checkpoints and two airports would need training to recognize and refer cases for suspected CITES violations. He welcomed proposed technical assistance from the U.S. Department of Interior under the regional MEPI grant for CITES capacity building, and encouraged such regional capacity building so that neighboring countries could develop similar implementation plans.

13. (U) In a separate meeting, Andrew Spalton, Environmental Advisor to the Diwan of the Royal Court, highlighted several key CITES enforcement challenges in Oman. These include:

- Ivory and rhino horns from Africa, which are sometimes used in dagger handles;
- Santush from India/Pakistan, which is widely used in headdress in Oman; and,
- Oud from Southeast Asia, which are often used as an incense/fragrance in Oman.

14. (U) Spalton was unsure if Oman would seek a CITES waiver for the widely used santush and oud. Kiyumi also noted that despite strong CITES enforcement in Oman, smugglers are able to get CITES permits from corrupt officials in Africa, making it difficult for Omani officials to prevent the import of these goods. Similarly, Spalton raised the issue of caviar from the Caspian Sea, which used to be packaged in United Arab Emirates until its CITES accession prompted many companies to transfer their caviar packaging across the border into Oman.

High Level of Environmental Awareness

15. (SBU) CITES implementation will benefit from a generally high level of environmental awareness in Oman, which Spalton credits to the Sultan's leadership and commitment to the environment, as well as to the integration of environmental issues in school curricula. Spalton highlighted that MECA was the first stand-alone environment ministry in the region when the Sultan created it in 1986. MECA has typically been a weak cabinet player in attempting to balance the aggressive development plans of the Ministry of National Economy and the Ministry of Tourism; however, Spalton believes the newly appointed environment minister (a member of the Omani royal family) is likely to raise the profile of environmental issues in the cabinet and will "fight from his corner" to balance development and tourism growth.

But Environmental Challenges Still Abound

16. (SBU) ESTH Officer's meetings, as well as his discussions

MUSCAT 00000122 002 OF 002

with attendees at the EPA's "Role of Science and Public Participation in Environmental Law" workshop in Muscat, generated a common listing of key environmental challenges facing Oman. Among them are:

- Widespread plastic bag use. Littering appears to be of particular concern since the bags (which do not decompose) blow into trees. Many bags enter the ocean, where sea-turtles and dolphins mistake them for jellyfish and eat them;
- Trash. While Muscat is a clean city due to organized clearing of trash, most wadis (valleys) in the interior are plagued with litter;
- Wildlife protection. The wild oryx population has dwindled from 500 in 1996 to less than 50 currently, as the natural wildlife habitats for the oryx have shrunk from 34,000 km/sq to 2,800 km/sq. (Note: Oman, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia are the only Gulf countries with wildlife in natural habitats. Oman has many Oryx bred in captivity. End note.);
- Public participation. There is a lack of grassroots participation in environmental issues, since Omanis are used to a top-down approach. (Note. The Omani government is now working with NGOs such as the Environment Society of Oman (ESO) and Earthwatch, which was invited by the Sultan to set up an office in Oman. End note.);
- Strengthening MECA. Local NGOs have noted that Environmental Impact Analysis documents are "rubber-stamped" by MECA, and that MECA has no real ability to stop new developments;
- Protecting the marine environment. Numerous oil tankers pass the 3,500 kilometers of Omani coastline daily, often discharging oil and ballast water.

Protecting Oman's Beauty

17. (U) In efforts to overcome these challenges, MECA is looking to strengthen its nature reserve system. Oman

currently has 14 protected areas under MECA's supervision. Ras al Jinz, a protected sea-turtle park located on the Arabian Sea coast, stands to suffer the most from tourism development, as the 42 kilometer coastline reserve is now unable to deal with the large number of visitors. To counter development plans for the surrounding area, MECA is working with the Ministry of Tourism to limit the number of planned hotels, as well as specifying low-grade lighting to encourage continued sea turtle nesting. Moreover, a private sector company recently contributed \$1 million to fund a management conservation center. (Note: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with MECA on a sea-turtle tagging and tracking project, along with providing training seminars for Oman's environmental rangers. End Note.) The ESO, the only local NGO which includes officials from the Royal Court and MECA as board members, has applied with the U.S. Department of Interior for a grant to improve sea-turtle park management. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will work with the ESO on expending allocated funds.

Garden to Showcase Oman's Flora

18. (U) Supplementing these efforts, Spalton and the Royal Court are leading the planning for an ambitious new Botanical Garden, to be located just outside Muscat. The 423-hectare park will include 1,200 native flora and fauna species based on a sustainable management principle. Varied habitats from Oman, including the southern mountains, central desert, and northern gravel, will be included, as will a heritage center, a nursery, craft center, and a 100-room hotel and spa. The park will be applying for platinum level LEED certification based on its use of renewable energy, water conservation, and reuse design. Twenty-four garden staff members have already grown over 35,000 of the approximately 400,000 plants needed for the target opening in 2011.
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